

The Howellsian

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“The Old Gobbler ‘First Premium’ Said They Were Going to Turn the Tables Now”
Illustration for “Turkeys Turning the Tables,” in *“Christmas Every Day” and Other Stories* (1892)

Papers Presented

at the ALA Conference, Washington DC, May 2014

William Dean Howells & Ethical Values

Chair: Dan Mrozowski, Trinity College

1. "A Hazard of New Entitlements: The Politics of Pensions in William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes*"

Daniel Graham, University Connecticut—Storrs

While Andrew Rennick's 2003 article "'A Good War Story': The Civil War, Substitution, and the Labor Crisis in Howells' *A Hazard of New Fortunes*" does well in linking the Gilded Age identities of Dryfoos, Woodburn, and Lindau with the roles they played in the Civil War, one facet overlooked is that of Lindau's historically anomalous reaction to the military pension system. A would-be patriot of the Civil War, Lindau figures as a perennial source of foreignness amidst a cast of decidedly "more" American characters, his dissimilarity deriving not so much from his German dialect as from an unwavering anti-capitalist perspective. Whereas Dryfoos and Woodburn consciously consider the gain or loss of profit in *Hazard*, Lindau seeks to enlighten those around him as to the oppression intrinsic to profit itself. But Lindau's politics are made incongruent for the fact that he repudiates his Civil War pension, itself a hot-button political topic of *Hazard's* era. Issues corresponding to military pensions such as workers' rights and immigration reform in the 1870s and 1880s are valuable in gleaning Lindau's politics more accurately than existing scholarship has considered. This paper highlights the real tragedy of Lindau and, by approximation, of Howells's text: no real-life counterpart was quite as principled as the character, thus rendering his righteousness as little more than a romanticized caricature of a socialist ideal.



2. "Redemptive Realism: Liberation Soteriology in the Novels of William Dean Howells"

Andrew Ball, Lindenwood University

After having a conversion experience in 1887, William Dean Howells—formerly the nation's most esteemed defender of bourgeois culture—chose to de-

vote all of his celebrity and all of his artistic energies to exposing the modes of exploitation and moral degradation that he believed were intrinsic to the emerging system of industrial capitalism. During this period, Howells took his place in an American intellectual tradition that sought to oppose capitalism on religious grounds; this "social Christianity" had taken root in the early years of market expansion and had given rise to Transcendentalism as well as forms of abolitionism and early labor activism. The ultimate objective of these activists was social salvation—the redemption of American society.

Over the next decade, Howells composed a series of so-called "economic novels"—*Annie Kilburn* (1888), *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), *The Quality of Mercy* (1892), *The World of Chance* (1893), and *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894)—in which he developed the most sophisticated literary critique of modern capitalism to date. In these works, Howells advances a theory of reification, arguing that the recent shift in dominant American values stems directly from the sacralization of capitalism. He contends that the attributes and aims of capitalism have been imbued with divine significance, leading Americans to confuse industrial norms with the means to salvation. Howells argues that capitalism has become the new American religion, a faith predicated on norms that are antagonistic to the fundamental ideals of both Christianity and American democracy. However, he also maintained that "the author was the prophet of better things; he was a Moses, who, if we followed him, would lead us up from" bondage, to the progressive redemption of modern American culture (*World of Chance* 349).



3. "Howells' Christian Faith in 'A World Come of Age'"

Thomas Wortham, UCLA

Howells was of the generation that came of intellectual age just in time to meet full-force the varieties of "Darwinism" and "the Victorian dilemma." Like so many others of his time and place he became an agnostic, the new word coined just a few years before by

Thomas Henry Huxley. But perhaps a better word for Howells' intellectual strategy regarding faith and doubt is skepticism. He never stopped questioning the meaning and consequences of the Christian faith about which he was remarkably well-informed, a faith tradition that had an enormous influence upon his gradual understanding of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer would later call "the world come of age." Howells' so-called agnosticism was not an escape from the consequences of belief and doubt, but rather a strenuous engagement with the meanings at the foundation of the Christian gospel. Howells frequently described faith as "mystical"; it was a matter of the heart, not of the head. Remembering that both "creed" and "belief" come into English from Latin and German words related to the heart and to the condition of love, Howells goes on to explain: "Experience, the whole of what we have known up to a certain time, not the process of logic, is what prepares us for the reception or rejection of this postulate or that; the heart must be touched before the brain can be reached." But reached only through or in spite of doubt. Dostoyevsky, whose works Howells was the first to champion in this country, claimed that his faith had to pass "through an enormous furnace of doubt." Perhaps faith without doubt is no true faith at all; perhaps doubt is indeed as some have said the handmaiden of faith.

Works considered: *Stops of Various Quills, The Leatherwood God*, and numerous essays. An earlier and longer version of this paper, "William Dean Howells's Spiritual Quest(ioning) in a 'World Come of Age,'" was published in *Renascence* 65 (Spring 2013): 206-224.



William Dean Howells in the 1890s

Chair: Dan Mrozowski, Trinity College

1. "William Dean Howells, a Realist Poetics, and the Limits of 1890s American Democracy"

Patricia Chaudron, University of Buffalo

Poetry's more abstract nature seems to preclude the type of sympathetic inhabitation that prose invites. Due to its variety and inclusivity in terms of perspective, nineteenth-century realist prose has therefore come down in history as the genre of choice to represent the complexities of American democracy. I will, however, argue that in the socially turbulent 1890s—which witnessed the lynching of African Americans, the imperialist violence of the 1898 Spanish-American War, and labor

riots due to economic insecurity—William Dean Howells turned to poetry to bring a new and troubling depth to the realist movement. Although nineteenth-century poetry has often been associated with individualized idealizations, Howells's most fraught interactions with American life surface in his neglected poetry.

Poetic form allowed Howells to more emphatically question what common ground was possible in America and whether literature could create new meaningful connections between people. Howells's poems indeed question the presumed oppositional relationship between realism and poetry and show the existence of what I term a "realist poetics." Focusing on Howells's 1890s poetry, I will complicate "Howellsian realism" and turn it into a space that also includes the reenactment of exclusion, frustration, and miscommunication that are inescapably bound to the democratic experiment in late nineteenth-century America. Howells's poem "Labor and Capital" features in this re-routed constellation of meaning by brutally exposing that the discomfort with the otherness of poverty is not necessarily dispelled by charity and empathy but often perpetuated by them.



2. "William Dean Howells's Failed Utopia from the Feminine Narrative View"

Margaret Jay Jessee, University of Alabama—
Birmingham

William Dean Howells's 1893 novel, *The Coast of Bohemia*, named in reference to *The Winter's Tale's* depiction of a seacoast in landlocked Bohemia, presents a pretend land of its own: a place for equality and community for women in art. Howells names his fictional representation The Synthesis School, a pay-as-you go art collective institution that accepts women students. Cornelia, a talented yet untrained woman artist, enrolls only to find herself among a group of masqueraders, women who glorify the bohemian lifestyle without having any real substance or talent. The school is a romantic farce, and Cornelia leaves in order to fulfill her role as a teacher, a wife, and a subject of her husband's paintings. Howells's school of talented women artists, much like Nathaniel Hawthorne's representation of Brook Farm in *The Blithedale Romance*, is a failure because it is merely a pretend arcadia, a coast pretending to exist in a landlocked bohemia. Importantly, the narrative point of view is Cornelia's, and as a result, the critique of the failed art school is Cornelia's critique. This essay argues that How-

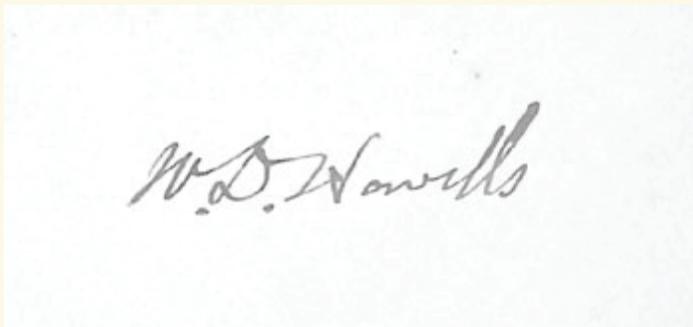
ells's novel presents a complex and intriguing examination of both gender and art, one told through the viewpoint of a feminine version of realism. Rather than a means of criticizing women in art, the novel suggests that attempts to separate gender from social reality result in a failed utopia.



3. "Our 'Imperative Duty': Why Teach Howells's 'Race' Novella Now"

Charles Baraw, Southern Connecticut State University

"Our *Imperative Duty*: Why Teach Howells's 'Race' Novel Now" uses evidence from students' work and Baraw's experiences teaching the novella to argue against recent criticism that sees *An Imperative Duty* as complicit with and even perpetuating the white supremacist ideologies it depicts. When students pay close attention to the melodrama of the marriage plot, to the subtle narrative technique (the primary focalization through Dr. Olney and the extraordinary switch to Rhoda in the notorious Chapter Twelve), and to the language that characterizes Olney and Rhoda's racist prejudices, they quickly grasp the limits of his judgment and representation of events. Enabled in part by Paul Petrie's restoration of Olney's most bigoted language in the Broadview Edition, students are able to make connections between his early racist attitudes toward the Irish and the later more extreme expressions of racism—making it clear to students that both "whiteness" and "blackness" are social constructions, not essential categories. Once attuned to Olney's racist attitudes, moreover, students become more aware of the artifice and melodrama of the plot: an artifice that, students are quick to point out, draws attention to other fictions portrayed in the novel, particularly the white supremacist fictions of race. Teaching *An Imperative Duty* now, it turns out, allows our students to help us shift our own thinking about the novel beyond critical paradigms that might, paradoxically, keep it out of our classrooms.



CFP

Call For Papers

William Dean Howells Society Panels for
ALA May, 2015

The William Dean Howells Society welcomes submissions for two panels at the 2015 American Literature Association conference in Boston in May 2015.

Panel 1: A Radical Howells

We are seeking papers on the political dimensions of William Dean Howells' work. We are especially interested in accounts of Howells as a writer engaged with the radical ideas of his day, and we welcome fresh discussions of his lesser-known works under this rubric. Topics may include the democracy of Howellsian realism, his defense of the Haymarket anarchists, his encounters with Tolstoy – including the Russian's embrace of nonviolence and economic equality—late 19th century socialism, his views on women's suffrage, his membership in the NAACP, his social novels of the 1890s, and his anti-imperialism.

Panel 2: Open Topic

We are looking for insightful, original papers that address any aspect of Howells's work.

Please submit your 200-250 word abstract and a current CV (or any questions) to Dan Mrozowski at

daniel.mrozowski @ trincoll.edu

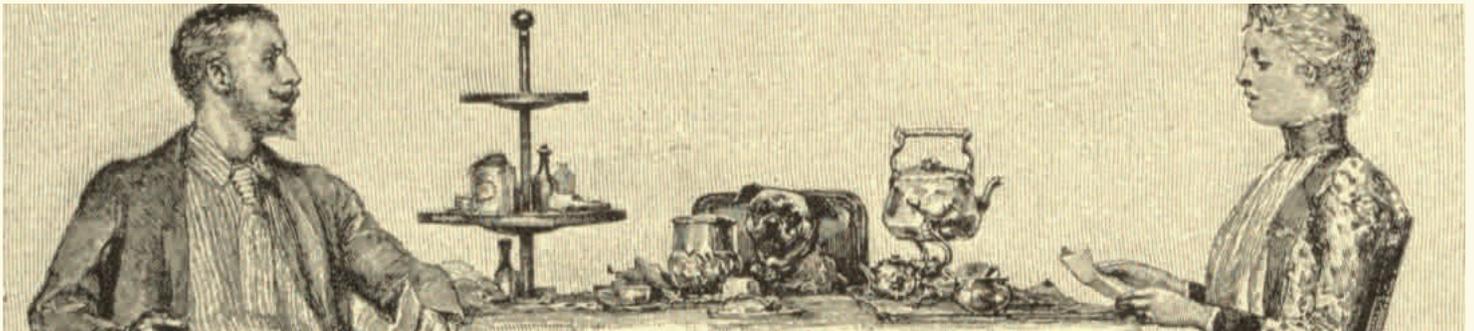
by January 31, 2015.

The 2014 **Howells Essay Prize** Competition Call for Entrants

The Howells Society Essay Prize is awarded each year for the best paper on Howells presented at the annual ALA conference. The winning essay may have been presented in any session on the program of the conference, including but not limited to panels sponsored by the Howells Society. Papers are judged by members of the Executive Committee, who have the option of appointing additional readers as necessary.

The author of the winning essay will receive a **cash award** of \$250, and the **winning essay will be published** (with the author's permission) in a future issue of *The Howellsian*. Copyright remains with the writer of the essay, so publication here does not preclude later publication elsewhere of a revised version of the essay.

2014 presenters who wish to enter their papers in this year's competition must submit them by **January 16, 2015** to the Society's President, Dan Mrozowski. You are welcome to revise your paper before submitting it, but please keep in mind that the essay should be a "conference length" paper and should not exceed 12-15 pages, maximum. Please send the papers as e-mail attachments, in MS Word format, to daniel.mrozowski@trincoll.edu.



Detail: "The Most Exciting Part." Illustration for "A Likely Story," in *The Mouse-Trap, and Other Farces* (1909)

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- **Graduate students** working on Howells may join the Society free for two years. Apply now.

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